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The Good, the Bad and the Unbuilt: Handling the Heritage of the Recent Past

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CHAPTER 8

REVOLUTIONARY ARCHAEOLOGY OR THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF REVOLUTION?

LANDLORD VILLAGES OF THE TEHRAN PLAIN

Hassan Fazeli and Ruth Young

Introduction

The Heritage CHAT conference and subsequent volume has offered us (as newcomers to historical and contemporary archaeology) the opportunity to consider different definitions and understandings of the heritage of the recent past, including value and significance, and to consider how different concepts might impact on our archaeological project, 'Landlord Villages of the Tehran Plain' in Iran. This is, of course, not simply an intellectual exercise, because in Iran, as in many countries around the world, often only monumental heritage, or heritage with clear monetary value, is considered worthy of being curated, preserved or presented. The importance of considering the heritage of the recent past in Iran is further increased because the material remains that are the subject of our work are closely linked to a particular political regime and the dramatic events surrounding the end of this regime and the movement to another. Such events have been played out on the world stage and the legacy of political and ideological change in the second half of the 20th century has done much to shape general views of life in Iran as perceived from the outside.

The project is directed jointly by the authors and draws on staff and students from universities and museums in the UK and Iran and the three seasons of fieldwork to date (2007, 2008 and 2009) have been funded by the British Institute of Persian Studies. Many past and present travellers in rural Iran have noted the mud-brick walled, self-enclosed landlord villages in the landscape and these structures have also been the focus of more systematic historical and ethnographic observation and study. Now largely abandoned, these villages offered the opportunity for exploring the use of space in relation to status, economic function and individual and group identity. Iran's 'White Revolution' of the 1960s and 1970s had a huge impact on social and political organisation and relations and one area where this impact is manifest in terms of material remains are landlord villages. The antiquity of these villages is generally agreed to be rooted in the early Islamic period (following the Arab invasion in the 7th century AD), although their origins and their actual dates remain largely conjecture. What is clear from a range of records is that landlord villages were an accepted and extensive form of social and economic organisation for large segments

of Iran's rural population for the centuries leading up to the radical changes of the second half of the 20th century. This project aims to record the remains of these walled, mudbrick villages in the Tehran Plain before they are entirely lost and to situate them within an historical and ethnographic framework.

We also aim to record and analyse the material culture of landlord villages in order to further understand the social and economic relationships between landlord and farmers and between farmers; and in doing so to consider the creation and expression of identity within these villages and to provide a model of spatial analysis linked to function which can potentially be applied to self-contained settlements at different points in history and prehistory. Issues of struggle and resistance are major themes in historical archaeology (Casella 2002; Lucas 2004) and we explore them here through the study of artefacts and buildings, and by interviewing people who had lived in the villages. In this paper we will discuss our findings to date and our preliminary analyses and in we will show how our project is addressing the recent past as heritage, offering multiple readings of a past and also exploring boundaries between social and physical heritage. In conclusion, we argue that landlord villages illustrate how that the recent past of ordinary, unnamed people could be deemed as much a part of heritage as palaces belonging to rulers or religious sites.

Heritage in Iran

'Heritage' in Iran is extremely important in terms of shaping both national and personal identity and there is considerable pride in Iranian heritage, particularly in relation to the historic empires such as the Achaemenids, Parthians, Sassanians and Safavids (Brosius 2006; Mostafavi 1978; Niknami 2000, 172). The material remains of these empires are critical in the shaping and maintaining identity and a good example of this is the UNESCO World Heritage Site of Persepolis the ceremonial capital and palace attributed to Darius I, and destroyed by Alexander the Great in c. 331-330 BC (Brosius 2006). Persepolis is, perhaps, Iran's best known heritage site and image both within and outside the country providing some iconic 'Iranian' images, such as the bulls, kings, griffins, or mythological Homa birds,

the latter used on Iran's national carrier Iran Air as their distinctive logo. Persepolis was also the setting for the 1971 celebration of 2500 years of monarchy – from the Achaemenids to the 20th century – an event organised and hosted by Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, the last Shah of Persia. In addition to playing a powerful role in reinforcing his legitimacy to the throne and rule of Iran, this celebration was famous for the great tented city built at Persepolis and its displays, the invited heads of state from around the world and a state banquet lasting five and half hours, which was the longest and most lavish state banquet on record.

Sites such as Persepolis, Imam or Naghsh-e Jahan Square and the mosques and palaces of Esfahan, and similar monumental sites, have contributed greatly to a heritage closely tied to royalty and elites in Iran. However, the length of occupation and diversity of peoples and geography that have contributed to modern Iran mean that there is far more to the heritage of this country than the most well known popular heritage images. Our project offers a rather different perspective on Iranian heritage, being concerned with the very recent past, and the material remains of very ordinary people; the rural poor who made up vast proportions of Iran's population.

Landlord villages and their occupants have been studied in terms of their role within economic and social history in Iran (Keddie 1968; Lambton 1953) but there are no known studies of the villages exploring them in relation to the cultural heritage of Iran. In the course of our fieldwork we spoke to former occupants of the villages, other local residents, archaeologists within Iran and other academics about these villages and life within them. While all of these people agreed that they had played an important role in the recent history of Iran, they were not viewed as unusual or special in any way; certainly not structures on a par with an archaeological site such as Persepolis. It would be difficult indeed on many levels to try to claim that there is parity in cultural heritage terms between these villages and Persopolis, but we would like to show people that heritage is a highly nuanced concept and that the everyday, the recent and things perhaps associated with unpleasant episodes in the past could also be considered as part of identity and heritage.

The majority of work to date on these villages in the form of historical and ethnographic studies, by scholars such as Keddie (1968) and Lambton (1953) has focused on such issues as land tenure, production, and land redistribution, with some attention to social and economic hierarchies within the villages. Keddie (1968, 74-5) reported a hierarchy of some 14 classes of adult males within Iranian villages, from the landlord (usually absentee), through cultivators to casual labourers, claiming that the vast majority of villages have at least some of these classes in place. Clearly these villages were not simple or egalitarian in their internal organisation and one of our objectives is to determine whether it is possible to detect this type

of complex hierarchy through analysis of the public and private spaces in the villages.

The villages themselves as structures, and other material culture have not been the subject of systematic study, nor has there been any sustained attempt previously to understand either the ways in which space has been shaped by the occupants, or the way it has in turn affected activity and function within the villages. Today, as abandoned, self-contained elements of an earlier economic and social structure, landlord villages provide an excellent opportunity for archaeological study in a number of areas.

Landlord villages

The project is located on the Tehran Plain to the south of Tehran itself, on the very fertile plain between the foothills of the Alburz Mountains and the deserts of central Iran (Figure 8.1). As in many other parts of Iran, there are numerous abandoned, often semi-ruined, mudbrick enclosure walls, around what appear to be large house compounds or small villages. These are landlord villages: mudbrick, walled villages with houses for farmers and a separate, much more elaborate house or houses for the landlord. The landlord owned not only the village itself, but all the surrounding farm land and had considerable power over the lives of the people in his domain. These villages represented social and economic order for a large segment of the Iranian population over many centuries until the 'White Revolution' of the 1960s and 1970s which was a series of reforms aimed at altering the economic and social structure for much of Iran (Ansari 2003, 211). A key part of these reforms was the redistribution of agricultural land owned by a small number of wealthy landlords amongst the farmers who had worked the land and lived in these walled, landlord villages.

Landlord villages have been described as feudal in nature, but as Richards points out, this is in fact inaccurate. While medieval European peasants had a measure of legal security and could pass down certain land access rights from generation to generation, Iranian villagers had no similar rights and were subject to what has been called the 'arbitrary will of the landlord' (Richards 1975, 4). The landlord/villager relationship was generally highly polarised where the 'landowner regards the peasant virtually as a drudge, whose sole function is to provide him with his profits and who will, if treated with anything but severity, cheat him of his due' Furthermore, according to Lambton, the landowners did not consider the provision of good housing or hygiene facilities important for the residents of their villages (Lambton 1953, 263). Keddie's survey work in 1954 agreed, having found 'appalling conditions; locusts and clover as the main food supply in a few areas; a majority seriously diseased' (1968, 75). We were interested in finding out whether the analysis of material culture and interview data would support these general and negative accounts.

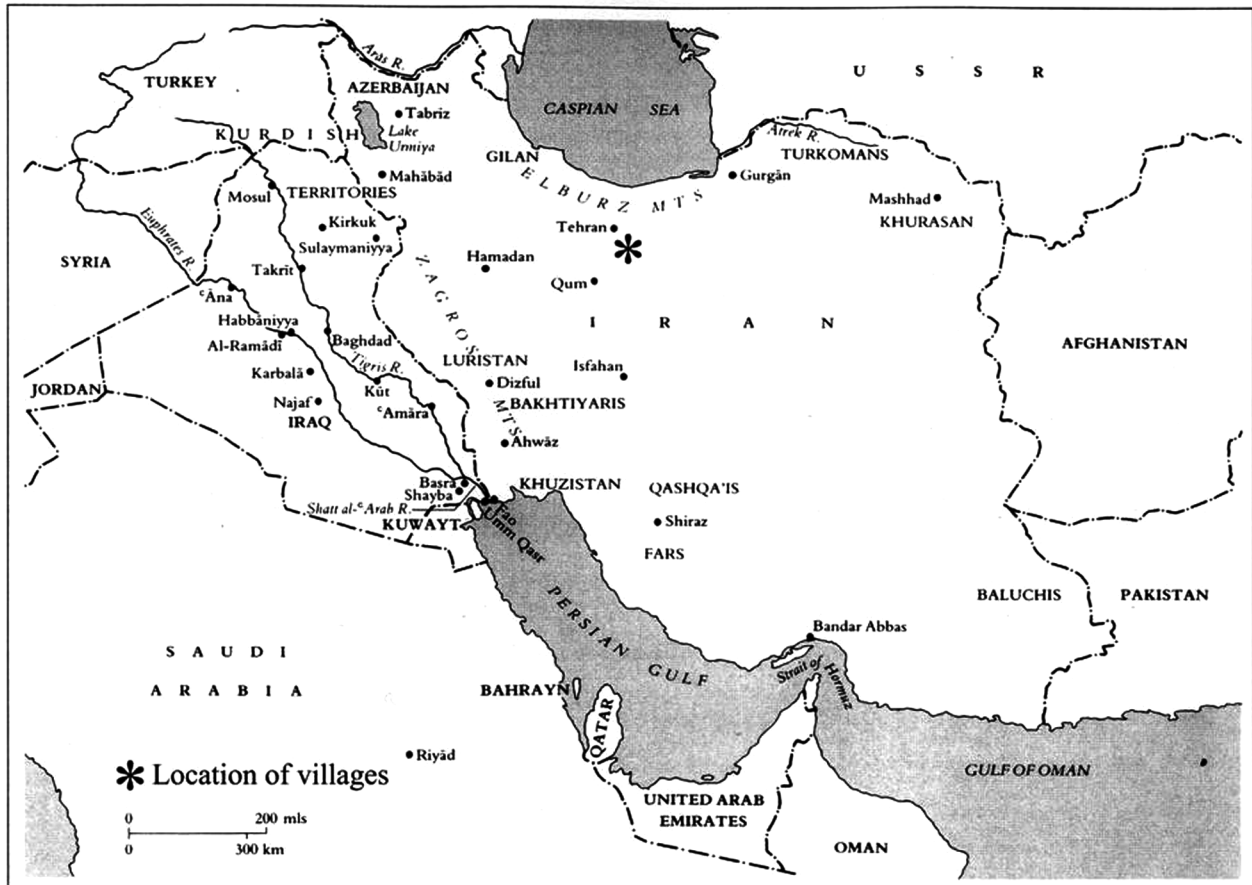


Figure 8.1. Location map of villages. © Authors

Methodology

We have conducted two field seasons to date, the first in 2007 (Fazeli and Young 2008) and the second in 2008. In 2007 we identified two villages, Kazemabad and Hosseinabad Sanghar, both to the south of the city of Varamin and we produced very detailed ground plans of each building within each village. We created a digital photographic library of each building, both for analysis and to provide a record of condition to chart decay and loss of the villages over time. We also met and interviewed ten people who had been associated with these villages; eight who had lived in them, and two who had been linked to them though trade, asking questions about economic activities, social relations and use of space. We then took these interviewees to the villages and walked with them around each building asking them to explain the function of each and the activities that had been carried out there. This allowed us to produce annotated plans showing these functions and from this, we have begun to develop a model of use of space and social and economic activity within the villages (Figures 8.2 and 8.3).

In 2008 we explored the village of Gach Agach, located south of Tehran near the road to Qom, which was occupied up until the early 1990s when the land was acquired in

advance of construction of the Imam Khomeini Airport and the villagers re-settled in the nearby town of Robat Karim. We took the same approach at Gach Agach as we had at Kazemabad and Hosseinabad Sanghar, creating a detailed plan of the site and interviewing five people who had lived in this village up until the 1990s. Again, we walked with these interviewees round the village in order to determine the functions of spaces and buildings (Figure 8.4).

In addition to planning the villages, the ethnographic interviews, creation of detailed annotated plans, and analysis of the standing remains, we were also keen to determine whether we could obtain artefact assemblages for these villages, and if so, analyse these in order to understand more about the lives and relationships within them. In order to do this, we carried out excavations at Kazemabad in 2008, opening five small test trenches in different parts of the village to test the viability of excavation as a means of collecting data. These five trenches were placed thus: Trench 1 inside a farmer's house; Trench 2 inside the landlord's house; Trench 3 across the base of the old wall inside the village; Trench 4 in the landlord's house in room identified for use by women and Trench 5 in the yard of a row of farmers' houses (Figure 8.5).

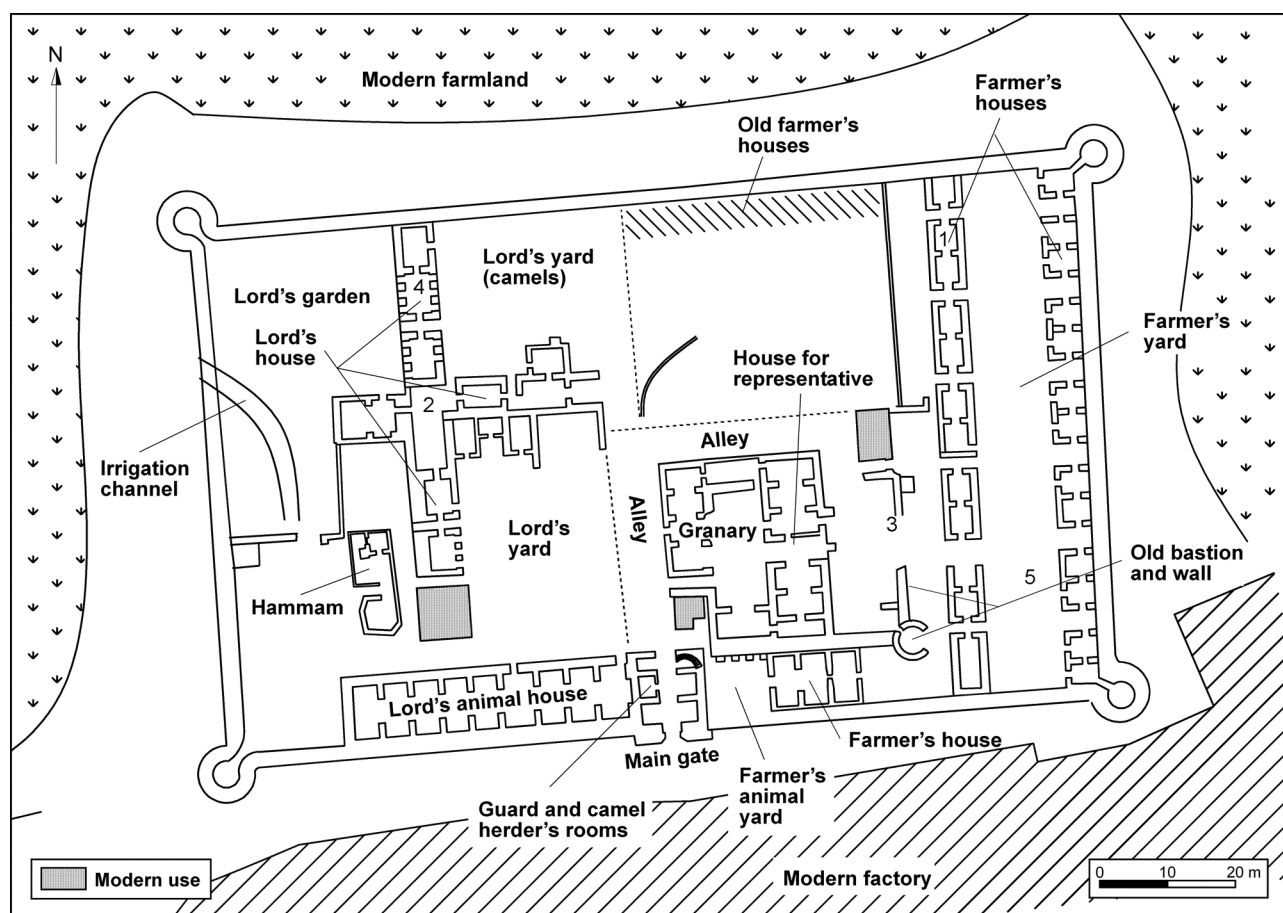


Figure 8.2. Kazemabad annotated plan. © Authors

Results of the planning and interviewing

Preliminary analysis of our village plans and ethnographic interview data shows that in both Kazemabad and Hosseinabad Sanghar villages there was a clear separation of the space for the landlord and for the farmers, with the landlord occupying a much larger area than any single farmer (Fazeli and Young 2008). The landlord's area was physically separated by a high wall from the area of the village occupied by the farmers and the landlord also had separate areas for their animals for overnight and winter stabling.

In the farmers' areas there were also divisions into private and public space, although this demarcation appears to be clearer at Kazemabad than Hosseinabad Sanghar. This may be the result of the better preservation of structures in the former which shows that there is a great deal of complexity within the village, and also the likelihood that certain areas and buildings have changed over time. The more complete plan of Kazemabad also allows us to understand more about changes in features and the different functions of space over time. It is interesting that while Kazemabad is the larger village in terms of size, the village population is similar for both, with possibly even more farmers' houses in Hosseinabad Sanghar. The number of families

living in Kazemabad was estimated at 25 families by our interviewees, with the average size of each household given as around six people, thus giving a village population of 150. At Hosseinabad Sanghar the interviewees said that there had been around 30 families. If we use the same figure of six people per family or household, we arrive at the figure of 180 for the village population. In relative terms, the landlord's house and garden occupies around half of the area of Kazemabad, while in Hosseinabad Sanghar, the landlord's house and animal stabling occupies around one quarter of the village area.

The only craft activity carried out in either village was carpet making by some women within individual houses. Otherwise, there was no metal working, or potting. We were told that all manufactured goods such as pans or clothes were bought in the market at nearby Pishva and Varamin or potters would bring in their wares by donkey from several (non-landlord) potting villages in the area. There were no religious specialists or specialised religious buildings and the only specialist 'jobs' were those of camel and horse tender for the lord; the gatekeeper at Kazemabad (who combined this job with camel tender); midwife at Kazemabad; and part-time *hamam* (public baths) attendant at Kazemabad. The *hamam* at Kazemabad was located within the landlord's part of the village, accessed from a

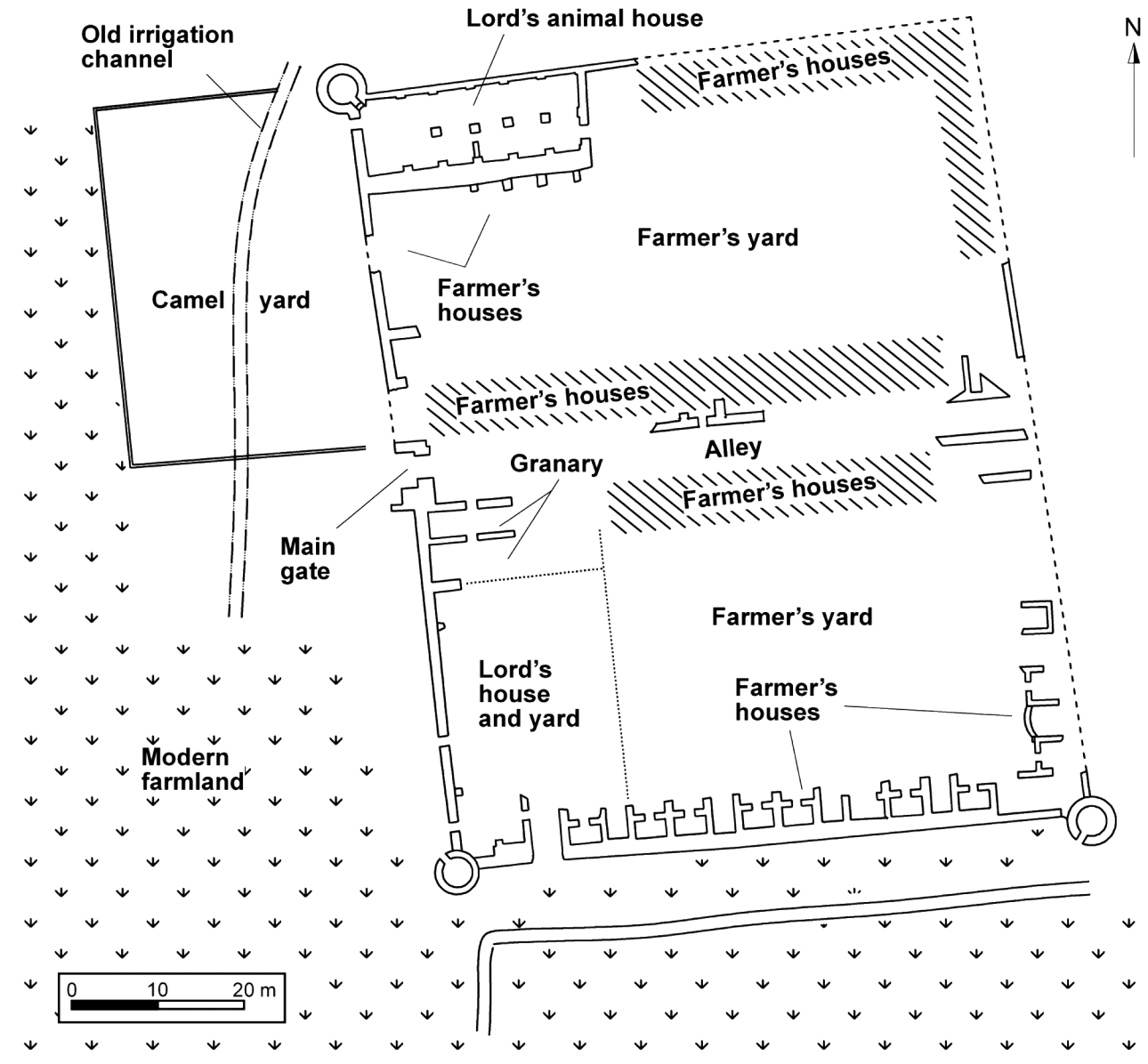


Figure 8.3. Hosseinabad Sanghar annotated plan. © Authors

lane alongside the landlord's animal stables, and there were set days and times when the villagers were permitted to use it. The landlord and family had their own smaller, separate *hamam*.

The absence of craft specialisation, other than carpet-making, is surprising. This may be a result of the size of the villages studied. An estimated population of probably no more than 200 at peak periods, and much less than this at other times can be compared to landlord villages such as Aliabad near Shiraz, which had an estimated population of 3000 before land reform (Hooglund 1982, 11). Half the adult men of the village were engaged in trade rather than subsistence farming, and most of the itinerant traders and shopkeepers of the whole region came from Aliabad itself.

The population of Gach Agach in the 1960s and 1970s (at

the time of the White Revolution) was estimated as 40-45 'large' families. If we use the same average of six people per household, this gives an estimated population of 240-270 people, which is considerably more than at either of the other two villages. One of our informants at Gach Agach said that seven was the average family size in the village. This higher population of farmers' families is supported by the allocation of space within the village, as shown in Figure 8.4, the annotated plan giving the function of each area. The landlord's house, located against the southern part of the western wall is far smaller in Gach Agach than at either Hosseinabad Sanghar or Kazemabad and there are many more farmers' houses in the centre of the village than at Kazemabad. Although there are no clear walls or remnants of walls separating the landlord and farmer areas at Gach Agach as there are at the other two villages, the ground plan suggests that what are now the animal yards and the

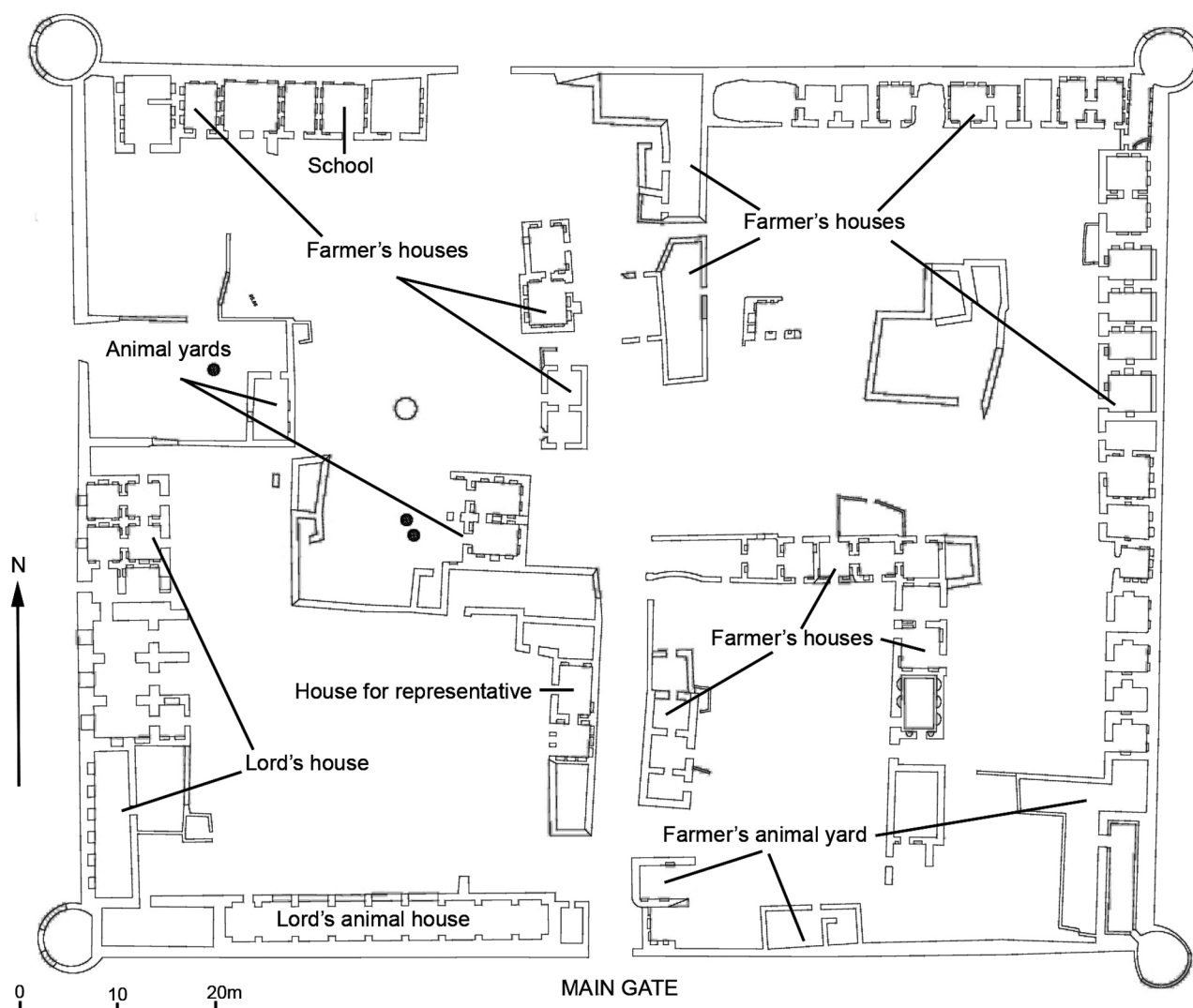


Figure 8.4. Gach Agach annotated plan. © Authors

representative's house would have likely been part of the landlord's house complex in earlier periods, becoming used for different functions as the role of the landlord himself changed, and the needs of the village changed.

In all three of our villages, the landlord's house is located in the western half and in both Gach Agach and Hosseinabad Sanghar this house is in the south western quadrant of the village; in Kazemabad, the landlord's house occupies the western half of the village. In both Gach Agach and Kazemabad the landlord's animal housing is located along the west end of the southern wall, and at Hosseinabad Sanghar, along the western end of the northern wall.

The results from Gach Agach confirmed our general findings from Kazemabad and Hosseinabad Sanghar; the separation of landlord and farmer; the separation of their animals; the relative absence of any production other than of agricultural goods, and the relative absence of any specialists within the village. However, Gach Agach offers a slightly different view of life in a landlord village and shows

that it is important to remember that these villages were not monolithic entities – they were living and changing things (Horne 1994). Gach Agach was occupied by a larger population until later than either of the other two villages and this means that there is more evidence for the re-use of buildings. Many houses had been converted into stabling during the most recent period of occupation and we were told about the use of two houses for shops selling sweets and drinks and similar items. Furthermore, one farmer's house against the northern wall of the village was used first to house a pump for water for the whole village and then after the failure of that water supply, this building remained public, being used as a village primary school.

Through our preliminary interviews we have identified four main social groups or classes within the landlord villages. These comprise the: landlord (*arbob*) and family; landlord's agent (*khadkhoda*) and family; those with specialised tasks such as shepherds and camel keeper and door keeper (*dash ban*); and farmers and their families. However, this does not translate so readily or clearly to structures within the village

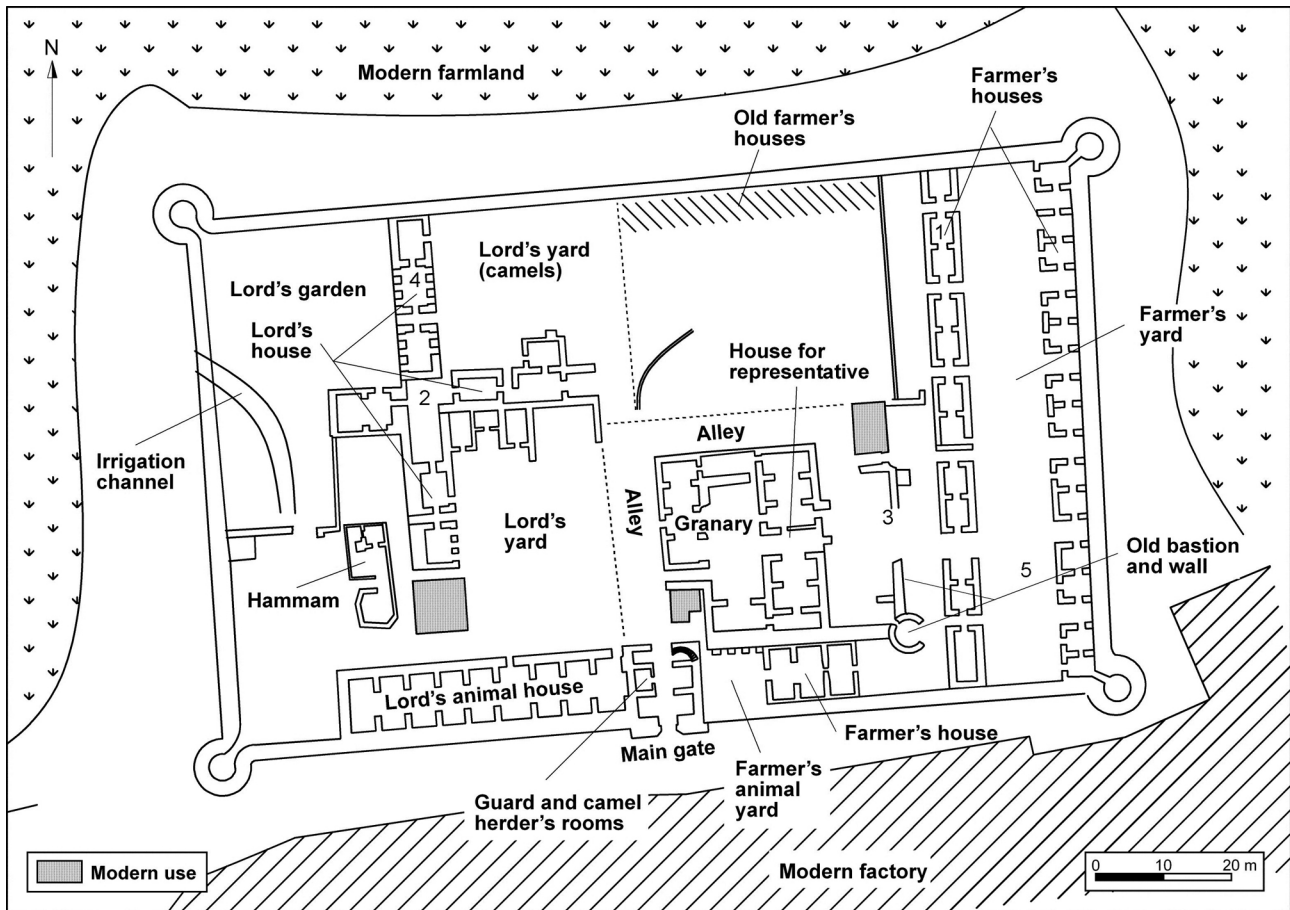


Figure 8.5. Kazemabad plan showing trenches. © Authors

where we tend to see a duality of housing (and possibly a three-tier structure at Kazemabad) rather than a four-tier hierarchy. Previous ethnographic enquiry carried out by one author has indicated that wealthier families tended to have houses in the centre of the village, while the poorer families lived in houses against the village walls (Fazeli 2001). This will be considered in future ethnographic questioning and raises interesting questions about the subtle expression of hierarchies and powers beyond such obvious indicators as size and complexity of residential structures.

Results of the excavation at Kazemabad

If the reports of Lambton and Keddle are accurate, then we would expect the material culture of the farmers to be very poor in contrast to the material culture of the landlords and in general, this was borne out through excavation. A total of 393 finds were recovered from all of the trenches including pottery, metal objects, mud brick, plaster, and a range of organic materials and objects including charcoal and unburnt wood, desiccated plant remains, animal bones and bone items. As part of our preliminary analysis we have counted the number of sherds from each trench and divided this count into plain, glazed and decorated wares. These counts are shown in Figure 8.6 and although it is a small sample, it does show that the majority of decorated or

glazed sherds (83 percent) were recovered from Trenches 2 and 4 within the landlord's house.

One of the most interesting of the glazed or decorated pieces was recovered from Trench 4 (within the women's room in the landlord's house) (Figure 8.7). This plate fragment is plain white with a glaze and has a Russian manufacturer's stamp on the reverse. Preliminary searches suggest that it was produced by the M. Kuznetsov factory in Verbilki in Russia, between 1892 and 1917 (Russian Antique 2006). This factory is located approximately 50m (85km) directly north of Moscow, making it 1600m (2580km) northwest of Tehran and the presence of this sherd shows that the landlord and family were using imported plates in this village, which provides a contrast with the very plain sherds of local manufacture recovered from the farmers' areas.

There are also other contrasts in the material culture between the landlord and farmers' areas, such as the amount of plaster and decorated plaster. While small amounts of plaster were recovered from Trench 1, larger amounts were found in both trenches in the landlord's house and no decorated plaster was found in the trenches in the yard of the farmers' area. Floors were found in Trench 1 (inside the farmer's house) and Trench 2 (the corridor in the landlord's house), but the former was a thin layer of rough concrete,

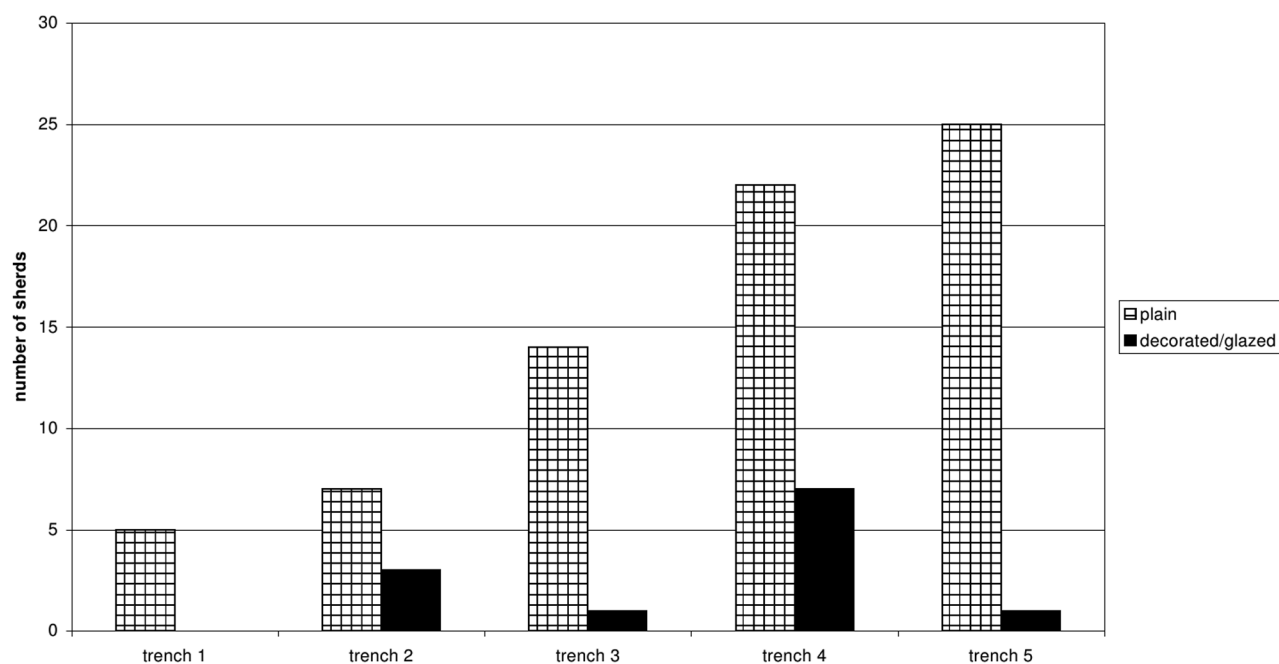


Figure 8.6. Sherd counts: decorated/glazed pottery and plain pottery numbers from each trench at Kazemabad. © Authors.



Figure 8.7. Russian plate Trench 4 Kazemabad. © Authors



Figure 8.8. Pipes in Trench 2 Kazemabad. © Authors

while the latter was made of fired bricks. At the bottom of Trench 2 we found a jointed ceramic drain-pipe (Figure 8.8) indicating sophisticated plumbing within the landlord's house, while nothing indicating plumbing was found in the farmer's house. Additionally, a well made child's leather shoe was found in Trench 4. Very little was recovered from Trench 1 (inside the farmer's house) but one piece of pottery was identified by a visitor to the site (one of our informants from the previous season) as a piece of equipment for drug taking (Figure 8.9). Trench 5, in the yard of the farmers' houses, produced part of a bone comb, (Figure 8.10), which is likely to have been made locally.

Discussion

While we are aware that three villages and 15 interviews is a relatively small sample there are some trends in the data. Analysis of the village plans shows that the landlord occupied considerably more of each village than the 25 or more farmers' families, with the analysis of each building showing that the farmers' houses comprised two-three rooms and a yard while the landlord's house had perhaps five times as many rooms, plus extensive buildings used to stable the landlords animals. Furthermore, the gardens and open spaces of the landlord's area occupied considerably



Figure 8.9. Pottery item for possible drug use Trench 1 Kazemabad. © Authors

more of each village compared to the public spaces of lanes, yards and animal shelters in the farmers' areas.

The quality of buildings in the landlord's area also provides a clear contrast with those in the farmers' areas. While both are constructed of mudbrick we have recorded more plaster, ornate plaster, fired brick floors, ceramic drainpipes, highly



Figure 8.10. Bone comb Trench 5 Kazemabad. © Authors

individual building and room plans and private *hamams* solely in the landlord's area. In the farmers' area we found plain plaster, thin concrete floors, no evidence of drainage, uniform building plans, and a shared *hamam* in village in the case of Kazemabad, and no *hamam* in the village at Hosseinabad Sanghar.

The preliminary analysis of the artefacts recovered from excavation also shows considerable contrast, with the painted and glazed sherds primarily recovered from the trenches in the landlord's house, including the imported Russian plate and the leather shoe. When compared to the artefacts recovered from the farmers' area, such as plain local pottery, the bone comb, and the drug taking item, it is clear that the quality of material culture is greater in the landlord's section of the village. The farmers' houses were not totally devoid of items associated with leisure, even with activities that might be considered subversive or indicative of resistance. The interviewee who identified the drug taking equipment also told us that drug taking was not something permitted by the landlords in these villages. A preliminary comparison of the numbers of plain, glazed and decorated sherds recovered from the trenches shows that while most glazed and patterned pieces are from the landlords' areas, some derive from the farmers' areas.

All of this would suggest that in terms of material culture the farmers are very poor, with very little in the way of elaborate or luxury goods and the landlords are living far more luxurious and wealthy lives. However, whilst the farmers did not have imported china or have decorated plaster in their houses, they did have attractive items such as bone combs which are likely to have been made locally, and plentiful plain pottery, which also is likely to have been locally made.

In turn, and taking into account the very grim descriptions in the earlier published ethnographic and historical accounts (Keddie 1968; Lambton 1953), we may have expected the farmers to consider themselves oppressed, and be actively or passively engaged in an ongoing struggle to subvert the landlord and the system in place. If this were the case, we would also expect that they would have welcomed opportunities for sweeping and long term change. However, the outcome of our ethnographic interviews suggests that this was really not the case at all.

Ansari has commented on what is now perceived to as the mismanagement of the implementation of many precepts of the White Revolution, for example, the lack of capital infrastructure, the lack of state intervention in response to changes to the price of grain and the lack of equipment owned by individual farmers (2003). This may go some way to explaining our interviewees' contentment, indeed, nostalgia for life under landlord control. Without exception all of our interviewees said that life was better when the landlord had reason to invest in the land, equipment, and infrastructure such as *qanats* (underground irrigation canals). Many of our interviewees remained within the villages for years after the White Revolution, enjoying the social benefits of living within such a community and one interviewee from Kazemabad who left the village in the late 1970s returned again for several years in the 1980s because he believed that life was better for him inside the village. At Gach Agach, a reduced but significant population remained into the 1990s, leaving only when the village and surrounding land was subsumed into the security zone of the Imam Khomeini International Airport. For many of our interviewees from Gach Agach, the interviews and discussion of building function on site was the first time they had been able to return since the 1990s. Some of them, (including one who was an employee of the airport) found it an emotional experience, telling us what a very good place to live they had found it, how much they missed the place itself, their life there and the presence of the landlord.

Conclusion

Landlord villages have a striking physical presence across rural Iran noted by travellers for many centuries (e.g. Browne 1893; Ferrier 1856; Sykes 1922) including modern travellers wanting to know more about these intriguing ruins. There are many reasons for wanting to record and explore these structures and the relationships within them which are connected both to the role they played in such a large segment of the Iranian population, generally lumped together as rural poor or peasants, and of course their role in the events of the White Revolution.

Drawing together the different strands of this project will allow us to offer a different view of landlord villages. While not as striking or glamorous as Persepolis they were home to large numbers of people over many centuries and they played a crucial role in the social and economic organisation of this vast country. If heritage is considered to be at least in part a record or memory of key events and processes that have helped to shape a group or society, then we would argue that these villages are indeed heritage, although not necessarily a heritage that is widely recognised as grand or widely significant. One of our objectives is to offer new understandings of these villages and the relationships within them and to then allow people to make their own decisions about whether or not they should be considered 'heritage' in Iran.

In the early stages of planning this project several people

outside Iran suggested that these villages are a rather unpalatable part of Iran's heritage, and perhaps one best ignored and left to crumble and decay, and thus disappear out of sight and mind. Certainly, when we began our work we were unsure about the reaction of either those people with links to the villages from the 1960s or 1970s, or the people directly involved in the management of Iranian archaeology and heritage. This caution has been so far unfounded. Indeed, the immense interest and positive support we have received thus far suggests that they are of great interest to many different people, not only historical archaeologists.

Crucially, all of the villages are subject to decay and loss from a variety of processes, including industrial and agricultural encroachment, vandalism, looting, and weathering causing erosion of mud brick. Whether or not any of these villages should be preserved is a whole other complex debate drawing on 'heritage' issues, but this project exploring a small number of villages and the memories of people who lived in them, is ensuring that they are recorded before they are entirely lost.

In the future we will continue to analyse the material we have collected thus far, and include further ethnographic work targeted at issues that have arisen thus far, such as the distinction between farmers' houses against village walls and those in the interior of the villages. We will also be including work on government land documents compiled by an Iranian historian and we hope that further excavation will be possible. With an expanded artefact data set we aim to begin a preliminary artefact typology, particularly important for any pottery recovered, as at present there are no other records for recent and contemporary archaeological materials in this region.

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